



1848 in Germany

Permanent Revolution

In the thick of revolution great questions are suddenly thrust forward demanding decisive responses, in circumstances where the revolutionary forces - the Subject of History - are hardly coherent and may still be largely clandestine, and therefore invisible. In 1917 the revolution managed to articulate itself, as we will see during this course on “The State and Revolution”, to a considerable extent by reference to previous revolutionary experiences. One such passage of history began in 1848 and involved Karl Marx, who, like Lenin, applied himself to making clear the necessities of the moment, the line-of-march to be followed, and the allies to be taken.

Karl Marx's March 1850 Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League begins by describing the working proletariat as the "only decisively revolutionary class", and ends with a battle-cry for the workers: "The Permanent Revolution!"

In the Address, Marx is advocating all possible means of achieving revolutionary change which, if not theoretically irreversible, would nevertheless in practice not be reversed.

"The workers' party must go into battle with the maximum degree of organization, unity and independence, so that it is not exploited and taken in tow by the bourgeoisie," said Marx, with the events of the previous two years in mind, when the bourgeois allies of the working class had treacherously sold the workers out as soon as they could secure favourable terms for themselves from the reactionary feudal powers.

Marx then very frankly reviews the competing self-interests of the contending classes and fractions of the bourgeoisie.

"There is no doubt that during the further course of the revolution in Germany, the petty-bourgeois democrats will for the moment acquire a predominant influence. The question is, therefore, what is to be the attitude of the proletariat, and in particular of the League towards them," declared Marx.

"As in the past, so in the coming struggle also, the petty bourgeoisie, to a man, will hesitate as long as possible and remain fearful, irresolute and inactive; but when victory is certain it will claim it for itself and will call upon the workers to behave in an orderly fashion, to return to work and to prevent so-called excesses, and it will exclude the proletariat from the fruits of victory," warned Marx.

The working class must *“be independently organized and centralized in clubs,”* and *“it is the task of the genuinely revolutionary party... to carry through the strictest centralization,”* wrote Marx. Reading this section, it becomes clear that Marx was convinced that the building of the democratic republic and the building of the nation had to be one and the same set of actions.

The working-class tactics in alliance with the bourgeois democrats should be to *“force the democrats to make inroads into as many areas of the existing social order as possible,”* and constantly to *“drive the proposals of the democrats to their logical extreme”*.

The workers must always look ahead to the next act of the revolutionary drama. They will:

“contribute most to their final victory by informing themselves of their own class interests, by taking up their independent political position as soon as possible, and by not allowing themselves to be misled by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie into doubting for one minute the necessity of an independently organized party of the proletariat.”

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League, Karl Marx, 1850.](#)
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